PEATH REVENGE REPEMPTION

AMIRREZA MAHDIYAN

Death Revenge Redemption © 2025 by Amirreza Mahdiyan is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/

Cover design by the author.

Book design by the author.

No part of this book can be reproduced in any form or by written, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information retrieval system without written permission in writing by the author.

No ISBN assigned.

Note from Author

When I started writing *Death Revenge Redemption*, I wanted to capture a moment in time, early 20th-century Iran, a place where history churned with unrest and ordinary people bore the weight of it. Tabriz, with its shadowed alleys and fractured loyalties, became the heartbeat of this story. It's not a tale of triumph or easy answers. It's about revenge that cuts deeper than the blade, about survival that costs more than it gives, and about the messy, human truth beneath grand ideals. This novel grew out of late nights, scribbled notes, and a lot of second-guessing. The history and this story aren't perfect, but I hope they resonated with you and you felt their weight.

Thanks for reading. It's free because I just want it out there, in your hands, not locked away. This is my first stab at something this raw, and it's yours now as much as it's mine.

Chapter I

Thick smoke and the smell of gunpowder filled the building, lifeless corpses gazed at Amir with lifeless eyes. Amir walked through the hallway, his heart pounding as he approached the source of the screams and gunfire. Suddenly a pale hand grabbed his leg, Amir looked down, fear and shock etched on his face.

"Why, Amir? Why did you let us die?" The corpse whispered.

Amir shouted in grief, "I didn't want any of this"

Then, suddenly, the door in front of him opened, and Shah's guards rained bullets on him.

Amir woke up screaming, his skin as pale as snow, and cold sweat streaming down his face. He sat on the edge of his

bed, elbows on his knees, face buried in his hands.

"Again. Always the same damn dream." His voice, heavy with frustration, broke the silence.

"How many times, huh? How many times do I have to relive that moment?"

Amir exhaled sharply, and the room was quiet again, but his mind was anything but.

Finally, with a deep breath, he pushed himself to his feet. He moved to the corner where his clothes were folded, he wore his typical clothing; a crisp white shirt; dark wool trousers; and a heavy brown coat with a pocket for his watch. He then adjusted the flat cap on his head, casting a shadow over his scarred face

A small mirror hung on the wall, and Amir glanced at his reflection. The man staring back at him looked tired, dark circles

under sharp eyes and a scar on his cheek, a face hardened by the challenges of his life. He straightened his posture and turned away.

The main room of the hideout was dimly lit by a few oil lamps. Maps, papers, and notes were scattered on the table in the center of room and smell of the tobacco lingered in the air.

Amir pushed the heavy wooden door open, revealing the main room of the hideout. Three men and a woman were working. Just like Amir, they were remnants of a dream that had been shattered.

As Amir stepped inside, their gazes lifted towards him. No words were exchanged, but in their world, words were often unnecessary.

Amir met their eyes and gave a small nod. One by one, they returned the nods before lowering their heads back to their

tasks, marking maps, writing notes, or cleaning weapons.

He looked around the room, his few belongings neatly stacked against the wall. This life he led now, moving from one hideout to another, meeting shadowed faces in alleys, was nothing like what he'd imagined back then. Back when he was a believer.

Now he barely believed in anything, except his grudge against the crown. Today, he was meeting a Russian contact who promised guns and ammunition, payment enough to continue the work of disruption. At least for now.

The sky was gray, and a dim light cast over the city of Tabriz, Amir walked through narrow alleys, feeling the chill on his skin, but he paid no mind to it. The contact was to be met in a teashop, a place where anonymity was valued as much as the tea

After a while, a man with a face chiseled like a stone arrived. He gave a slight nod and slid into the seat across from Amir without a word.

"So," the man said with a thick Russian accent, his voice was as cold as his expression, "You have something for me?"

Amir offered a silent nod, then leaned closer to keep his voice low. "There is a group, hiding in an engine factory near Baku, and another one hiding in a silver mine near Yerevan. They've gone underground since the raid."

The Russian's eyes flickered with interest. "And I guess you want something in return"

"You guessed right, I still have some scores to settle."

The Russian let out a small, amused grunt, then nodded. From under his coat, he slid a small bag towards Amir. The

weight of it was satisfying. "Enough for a few skirmishes," he said.

Amir pocketed the bag with a slight nod, then left the shop without looking back, he felt the weight of the ammunition settle against his coat, a cold assurance.

k

Kazem sat behind his desk, looking at a picture of young man in a crisp and new military uniform. Reza, his younger brother, had been full of conviction, joining the royal guard with an almost naïve belief in loyalty and honor.

"A good man," Kazem murmured in the empty room. "I'll bring them down, Reza," he whispered. "One by one, until none of them are left to dishonor your memory."

With a heavy sigh, Kazem set the photograph down and opened the manila folder on his desk. Inside were details of a raid carried out days ago on a royal arms depot at the city's outskirts.

Kazem's fingers lightly tapped on the wooden desk rhythmically as he read the details of the raid, trying to discern the patterns.

This raid was one of many recent attacks that had struck Tabriz, each carried out by rogues from different factions with different motives. Democrats, whose intellectual members were getting bolder; Communists, though shattered and fractured by loyalist forces, were still clinging to their underground networks; Religious moderates with their own agendas; and loyalist agents trying to crush any opposition that challenged Shah's authority.

Kazem's eyes traced a rough map of the city pinned to the wall beside his desk.

Each district was marked with pins of various colors, red for loyalists under Shah's control, blue for moderates, green

for democrats and orange for districts suspected with communist activity.

He narrowed his gaze to the northern parts of the city, the attack pattern was emerging, but it didn't make sense. These were coordinated strikes but he couldn't guess which faction is responsible.

Kazem's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on his door. A junior officer entered, holding a fresh report in his hands.

"Detective Kazem," the officer said while placing reports on the desk. "I've brought the witness statements from the raid on the arms depot."

"Thank you, Omid," Kazem replied with a steady voice. Then he waited until officer left, then he opened the report. The statements were few; only one of the guards claimed to see some men enter. He was then hit on the back of the head and couldn't identify the attackers.

Kazem leaned back in his chair, considering his options. It was difficult to find and isolate rogues from different groups responsible for any of the attacks in the city. He was tracking ghost-like figures that moved in silence, shifting loyalties, and a city filled with rival ambitions and betrayals.

Kazem stood in the silence of his office, his thoughts clouded with the complexity of Tabriz's politics. He was determined to find a trail that he needed for a counterattack

*

Amir stood before his small band of followers around the table. His comrades' expressions were mixture of exhaustion and defiance. These were the few who had survived alongside him, the ones who had remained after the Shah's forces tore through their ranks. Each of them bore the scars, visible or hidden. They were bound together not by

ideology anymore, but by shared losses and the promise of revenge.

Amir cleared his throat and began, "We have all given up more than most could bear," he said, his tone unwavering. "We lost friends, families, homes, and some of us more than that. But we are still here, and they haven't forgotten us. They know we are thorns they can't pull out." His tone started rising "We've become ghosts to them," he continued "They can't find us, and that probably scares them, they know what we are capable of. Each time we strike, we remind them that their golds, guns and guards can't keep them safe." He watched them as heads nodded, eves hardening in agreement.

He set the cloth-wrapped bundle on the table, slowly unrolling it to reveal the shining ammunition. The sight of fresh bullets excited the group.

"These," Amir began while taking a bullet from the bundle and showing it to the group, "Are from an ally. Enough for few skirmishes. The Shah took from us, now it's time for us to take from them."

A murmur of approval spread through the band. Ali, his second-in-command, reached forward, with his gaze fixed on the ammunition. "This will do nicely," he muttered. "What's next?" he asked glancing at Amir.

Before Amir could answer, cellar door creaked open, and slim jittery man entered the room, Kamal, one of his informants, said hastily, "Mr. Amir, the noble up on the hill, Mahmoud Khan, is leaving his estate in two days to meet the Shah in Tehran, and he is going to leave all the valuables he has hoarded for years in his vault." Amir nodded, then turned towards his men, "Looks like we have our next target."

The air hung heavy with the scent of jasmine and the distant noises in the city. A full moon cast shadows as Amir and his band prepared for the assault. Amir traced the route on the map drawn by Kamal, his finger stopping at the courtyard.

"Yasaman, you'll divert the guards' attention at the main gate. Ali, take Hasan and secure the rear entrance. Kamal, you'll stay and observe for any potential dangers," Amir ordered, his voice cold and determined.

"Don't worry, Amir" Yasaman purred. Adjusting her veil and with a smile playing on her lips, she headed towards the gate.

"We'll be in position." Ali nodded, checking the pistol that clinked softly against his coat.

Amir remained hidden in the shadows, the rough brick cold against his back. He checked his pocket watch again.

Patience was a virtue, but time was a luxury they were short on. He strained his ears, listening for any sign of Yasaman's diversion. Across the street, Yasaman approached the main gate, her footsteps light on the cobblestones. The guards stationed there straightened, their hands instinctively moving towards the hilt of their sabers.

"Halt! Identify yourself," one of them barked, his voice rough.

Yasaman stopped. Then, with a sudden, theatrical cry, she dropped to her knees, clutching her side. "Help me! Please, help me!" she cried.

The guards exchanged a wary glance, "What's this then?" the same guard asked, stepping closer.

Yasaman pointed a trembling finger down the alleyway that ran beside the manor. "He...he tried to...he tried to..." she sobbed, her voice catching in her throat. "There were two of

them...drunkards...they tried to...and now they're trying to climb the fences!"

The guard's eyes narrowed toward the line of her finger. He saw movement in shadows, enough to confirm her story. "Jafar! With me!" he called to the other guard. Both guards hesitated for a moment, but then, with a curse, they hurried down the alleyway. Only one guard remained at the gate, a young one who looked nervous in the absence of his comrades. Yasaman rose to her feet with a fluid motion that belied her earlier distress, her eyes now hard and focused.

She moved with the silence of a predator, her soft-soled shoes making no sound on the stone. Reaching the guard from behind, she swiftly drew a thin, sharp blade from her purse. One swift, precise movement and the blade was between his ribs. He slumped forward, then his body hit the ground.

The other guard alerted by the sound turned back with a confused expression. Before he could react, Yasaman brutally kicked the guard's groin. As he doubled over, clutching himself, Yasaman's blade was deep in his stomach. She pulled the blade free and cleaned the blood with the clothing of the dead body. Then with a glance over to the place where Amir was concealed, she shook her hand, signaling Amir.

Amir emerged from the shadows, nodding to Yasaman, then approached the young guard.

"This is private property. State your business." The guard demanded, with sudden movement, Amir punched the guard in the face, the cracking of bone audible. The guard collapsed to the ground, motionless.

Amir headed towards the manor, passing through the yard where he could see Ali and Hasan sneaking in. He drew his

weapon swiftly, then cautiously opened the manor's door. Suddenly guard approached from corridor in front of him. Before guard could react, Amir's bullet struck between his eyes.

Ali and Hasan followed him in. They entered the dimly lit main hall, suddenly guards burst into view hearing the gunshot. Without hesitation, the three sprang into action. Amir positioned himself in the center, Ali flanked guards from the right and Hasan slipped behind a nearby statue.

The first guard charged directly at Amir, saber raised high. Amir sidestepped quickly, aiming and firing twice rapidly. The first shot was missed, but the second hit the guard's shoulder. The guard roared, his eyes narrowing as he swung his sword. Amir ducked, his movements fluid, spinning and firing once more, this time, the bullet tore through guard's chest, causing the man to collapse.

Meanwhile, Ali had taken cover behind a wooden table. He was exchanging bullets with a guard approaching him from the kitchen, as guard started reloading his rifle, Ali quickly emerged from cover and shot him in the head.

The third guard, armed with a short-barreled rifle, aimed at Amir from a distance. Before Amir could react, the guard fired-bullet slicing through the air. Amir dived to the side, narrowly avoiding the incoming fire. Seeing an opportunity, Hasan lunged at the guard with his knife and slashed his blade across the guard's weapon hand, in another swift motion, he pressed the knife deep into the guard's heart. The guard stumbled backward, then collapsed to the ground.

The building fell silent for a few moments. The only sounds were the heavy breathing of the three men. Amir exhaled slowly. He glanced at Ali and Hasan, his expression tight and cold. "Clear," he muttered. "Let's keep moving,

we have to find the vault and leave this place before the dusk."

Without hesitation, they moved deeper into the manor. Amir climbed upstairs, and crept through the narrow hall, the echoes of his boots swallowed by the thick Persian carpet. His heart still pounded from the fights. He passed the gold line framed family pictures, silk drapes, and crystal chandlers.

He checked all the rooms, and at the end of the corridor, he stumbled upon a locked door. He took a deep breath and then lunged toward the door and kicked the door open. To his surprise there was nothing but shelves of empty display cases.

"Damn it." He muttered, then turned around. He was looking around hopelessly when something flickered in his vision, a grip shining behind the bookshelf. He pushed the bookshelf aside and pulled the grip, revealing a dark

room lit only by light from the main room. At the end of the room, he spotted a chest. His heart raced as he approached it, but then he froze. A shadow moved in the main room. Someone else was there. Amir's grip tightened on his pistol as he looked toward the main room. His instincts screamed at him to act fast, but he held back, waited for the person to approach.

A figure stepped into the doorway, a large, chubby guard, his uniform dirty and his face pale with anger. The man's eyes darted to Amir, the guard lunged towards him without a word, drawing a curved blade from his belt. Amir rolled to the side, the guard's blade slicing through the air where he'd been a moment before. Then Amir drew his weapon, shot the guard in the side, and kicked the blade out of his hand. The guard turned towards Amir, his eyes filled with pain and fury. Blood seeped from the gunshot wound in his side, but he

didn't seem to notice it. With a roar, he lunged toward Amir, his weight crushing Amir like a battering ram.

Amir staggered, and they fell together. The edge of a wooden table caught the side of his head. His vision blurred, and a warm trickle of blood began to gutter, falling down his cheek. Amir tried to push the man off, but the guard was relentless. He sat on Amir and raised his fists. The first punch came hard, snapping Amir's head back against the floor. Another punch came. Then another. Each punch was slower but no less brutal. The guard was faltering, his movements slowed by the bullet wound, but his fury kept him going. Blood dripped from Amir's lips and nose.

Amir wanted to move, but his body was locked by shock and pain. Blood covered his eyes and mouth.

Then instinct took over.

His hand, shaking and weak, began to inch toward the knife in his pocket.

the guard's fists came down again, but this time Amir was ready. With a burst of desperate strength, he freed the knife and forced it into the guard's side, the same side where the pistol had wounded him. The guard froze, but Amir didn't. He stabbed again and again, the knife tearing into flesh with each strike. Blood flowed from the wound, covering Amir's hand and splattering onto the ground beneath them.

He collapsed onto Amir, his weight crushing him. With a groan, Amir shoved the man off. He lay there for a moment, chest heaving, blood dripping from his head, face, and hands.

"Mister Amir!" Ali and Hasan exclaimed, running towards him. "What happened?" Ali asked, though he could already guess from the sight of the dead body.

"There...is no time," Amir said, his voice low and trembling. "Yasaman should be close. Tell her to fetch the bags. And quickly."

Hasan ran outside, quickly called her, and a moment later Yasaman appeared, her small frame moved fast and swiftly. She was carrying two bags. Yasaman's eyes widened, her gaze first at the fallen body and then fixed on Amir, a wave of panic washing over her. "Oh my god, what happened? Are you alright?" she cried, running towards Amir, her voice trembling.

"No time," he barked, "Fill the bags and we are out."

Yasaman nodded, her expression a mixture of fear and concern.

The group sprang into action, their hand moving fast as they filled the bag with gold and jewelry from the chest that Ali had broken open.

The group slipped out of the manor. They reached the back entrance just as the sounds of pursuit echoed in the streets, drawn by the sounds of the gunfire.

"Go!" Amir hissed. One by one, they disappeared into the narrow alleys. They moved quickly through the labyrinthine streets.

The group burst into the hideout. Kamal, who had stayed behind to secure their safe return, was the first to speak.

"You pulled it off?" he asked, his eyes widening as Ali dropped the bag. The sound of clinking was answer enough.

"We did," Hasan replied. "The khan won't know what hit him."

The room filled with laughter and chatter, a rare moment of celebration among them. Ali uncorked a dusty bottle of liquor he had stashed away, pouring drinks for those who wanted. Kamal

slapped Hasan on the back and Ali messed with Kamal's hair.

Amir, however, stayed apart from the commotion. Without a word, he set the bag on the ground and walked to his room.

Inside his quiet room, Amir sat on edge of his bed, resting his head in his hands. His body ached from the fight, and his head burned where the table had struck him. The blood on his face and temple had dried, but the sting remained.

A soft knock broke the silence, and the door creaked open. Yasaman stepped inside, carrying a wet handkerchief and a small roll of bandages.

"I was worried," she said, closing the door behind her.

"It's nothing," Amir replied, his voice lacking conviction.

He stayed still as Yasaman approached and kneeled.

"Let me see," she insisted, her voice gentle. She pressed the damp cloth against the cut. The cold water stung at first, but her touch was gentle.

"You're always like this," Yasaman broke the silence, murmuring. "Carrying everything on your shoulders and pretending to be made of stone."

Amir didn't reply, but his eyes flickered to her lips.

"I know you," she continued, wrapping the bandage around his head. "You don't have to act like it doesn't hurt, not with me." Then she started cleaning the blood from his lips.

Amir's gaze softened. For a moment, he forgot about everything; all he saw was her.

"Yasamn," he said quietly.

She looked up, her dark eyes meeting his. She leaned closer, her hand still resting against his face, then their lips met in a kiss-gentle at first, then filled in unspoken yearning.

When they finally pulled away, Yasaman whispered while smiling, "Get some rest."

Amir nodded, watching as she stood and left the room. The sounds of celebration still echoed from the main room, but Amir barely noticed. He lay on the bed, the exhaustion finally catching up to him.

His eyes closed, and for the first time in a long while, Amir slept.

Chapter II

The sun hung high in the sky, casting light onto cold streets of Tabriz.

A carriage rolled through the streets, moving from avenue to avenue, alley to alley. The air was brisk, and the breath of pedestrians puffed like clouds as they went about their business.

"Hah, did you see his face?" bellowed a man with a curly beard, wearing elegant red clothing. "He blushed and turned as red as my coat in front of the Shah, like a little girl."

"Yes, my lord, he made an embarrassing act," replied his servant. "We are almost..." his words caught in his throat at the sight of the dead bodies near the corner of the manor.

"Allah help us... What happened here?" Mahmoud Khan barked inside the carriage, his eyes filled with terror and

shock. "Go and fetch the Shah's man! And the inspector! Now!"

"Yes, my lord." The servant broke into a run after stepping off the carriage.

Mahmoud stepped out of the carriage and stood frozen in place, his fists clenched as he surveyed the carnage. The iron gate stood ajar, and a body lay in front of the gate, his neck twisted at an unnatural angle.

His once proud estate, now full of blood and dead bodies. Only a single thought burned in his mind.

Who dared to do this to me?

Detective Kazem arrived a few hours later. He stepped down from his horse, his sharp eyes taking in the scene. Behind him, junior officer Omid dismounted as well

He Spotted the two bodies at the corner of the outer wall first. Kazem crouched beside them. Whoever had done this was skilled, likely using a sharp blade to cut through without resistance.

He moved to the gate, where another guard lay face-down in the dirt. Kazem knelt, tilting the man's head to examine the injuries, a broken nose and a neck twisted at a brutal angle.

"A punch," he muttered to Omid,
"Whoever hit him was strong, and fast."

Omid swallowed hard. "A single blow, sir? That takes..."

"Training," Kazem interrupted. He stood. "Or desperation."

He walked through the yard to the manor and was greeted by both Mahmoud Khan's angry face and three dead bodies. Mahmoud Khan stood in the center of the room, his face flushed red with fury. Around him lay bodies.

"Finally, you're here!" Mahmoud Khan barked, his voice echoing in the vast hall. "Do you see what they've done to my home? My men? My vault?"

Kazem ignored Mahmoud and crouched beside the nearest body, inspecting the wound. The blade had pierced deeply and killing in a single blow. He turned to the other guard who had been shot, running his fingers over the bullet hole in the man's uniform. The shot was clean and precise, probably fired at close range.

"They were quick," Kazem muttered, glancing at Omid. "Two died from bullet wounds, the other from a blade. The attackers didn't waste any time."

Mahmoud approached, his voice rising. "Detective, are you listening? They slaughtered my men and took everything!"

Kazem straightened, turning toward Mahmoud. "I am listening, Khan. And I'm working. Let me do my job, or you'll have no answers."

Mahmoud opened his mouth to protest, but it was too late. Kazem had already turned back to the scene.

"Omid, you check this room for any leads. I'll check upstairs." Kazem ordered, climbing the stairs.

"Aye, sir. I will." Omid replied with determined expression.

Kazem stepped toward the hallway leading to vault. He approached the room. Inside, the chest stood empty, its iron lock broken, and near it, another guard lay. His uniform soaked in blood.

He had multiple stab wounds in one area, a sign of desperation or rage.

Kazem knelt beside the body, calling Omid, then brushed his hand against the bloodied table edge. The struggle had been violent.

Omid approached to Kazem, glancing at the dead body.

"This one fought back, resisted hard. He tried to stop them, and they killed him for it," Kazem murmured.

Omid glanced nervously around the room. "Do you think they'll try again, Detective?"

Kazem rose slowly, his expression cold and unfocused. "They will," he said simply. "But next time, they won't slip away so easily."

*

Amir sat beside his workbench, his shoulders hunched as he dragged a cloth over the bloodied blade. The same blade had saved his life the previous night.

His mind replayed the scenes. The guards' shouts, the weight of their bodies collapsing under his strikes, the spray of blood against his face. They had been working for a noble, loyal servants of the Shah, and that alone was reason to kill them. He didn't pity them. But the heaviness on his chest wasn't about pity; It was about the toll it took.

"Get over it," Amir muttered to himself, his voice low and hoarse. His hand clenched into a fist and slammed against the table. "Be strong. These people are counting on you."

The room fell silent again, save for the faint creak of wooden beams above. Then the silence was broken by the soft creak of the door.

Amir's head snapped up as Yasaman stepped into the room. She didn't knock, and her sharp eyes took in the scene before her in a single glance. Her dark brows furrowed slightly as she noticed the tension in his posture.

"You are doing it again," she said, her tone carrying its usual bite.

Amir didn't look at her. "Doing what?"

"Hiding," she replied, stepping further into the room. Her voice was harsh, but there was an undertone of concern that softened the edges. "Don't hide anything from me Amir, I know you."

He set his knife down with a sharp clink, his jaw tightening. "You don't know anything."

"Perhaps," Yasaman said softly, "but I know enough." She stepped closer, her black leather shoes clinking softly against the floor. Her eyes softened as she looked

at him, but the concern in her gaze was impossible to ignore.

"I know that every time we come back from fighting, from killing, you're like this," she continued, her voice lowering. "Like you're carrying the weight of everything."

Amir looked down at the knife resting in front of him.

"Someone has to," he replied, his voice low but steady.

Yasaman shook her head. "You are wrong."

Amir took a slow glance at her but then returned his gaze to the knife.

"You're not as strong as you think you are. You don't have to carry all of it, Amir," Yasaman said, her tone gentle.

"What choice do I have?" Amir said, his tone rising.

"You can't keep up like this," Yasaman continued, her words calm yet pointed. "You'll burn out. You'll break, Amir."

For a moment, Amir held her gaze, but he said nothing.

Yasaman took a deep breath, her expression softening even further. "Come with me," she said softly, her tone almost a whisper.

"Where?"

"Just shut up and follow me."

Amir hesitated for a moment, but something about her made him obey. Reluctantly, he stood, and followed her as she turned and walked toward the door.

She led him up the staircase, her hand slightly gripping his as they ascended. When they reached the rooftop, she pushed the door open, and the world revealed itself before them.

The city, stretched out in every direction, a patchwork of brick houses, domed mosques, and minarets piercing the sky. Below, the narrow alleys seemed alive with murmured voices and rhythmic clatter of horse-drawn carriages. The labyrinthine street wove together in the heart of Tabriz. Farther away, the snow-capped peaks of the Sahand mountains gleamed.

Yasaman turned to him. Without a word, she took his hand and gestured toward the blanket she had laid out in the center of the rooftop. Beside it, a small pot of tea steamed softly, with two cups placed neatly alongside it.

Amir hesitated for a moment before sitting down, his gaze fixed on the horizon. Yasaman sat beside him, leaning back, her posture relaxed and open.

"You don't let yourself have these moments, do you?" she asked while pouring herself a cup of tea.

"Moments for what?"

"For yourself,"

"I don't have time,"

"You have time," she countered, her voice steady but soft. "You just don't want to take it."

Amir didn't answer, but his silence was answer enough.

"I wish you'd let me carry these feelings for you," Yasaman said softly, breaking the quiet. "Even just for a moment."

She leaned forward, her hands brushing against his as she moved closer. "Let me in," she whispered.

Amir hesitated, but before he could decide, Yasaman closed the distance between them and her lips met his in a kiss.

Her hands moved to his face, pulling him closer. And for the first time. Amir let

himself feel something besides grief and anger.

Yasaman pulled back slightly, her forehead rested against his, as she caught her breath. Her dark hair framed her face, and she looked softer, more vulnerable than he had ever seen her.

Her hands slid down to the waistband of his pants. She unfastened them as he watched her

Yasaman pushed his pants down before sliding back slightly. She reached for the hem of her dark red gown, lifting it to reveal the garter belt holding her black tights in place. She slipped of her garter belt and panties in one smooth motion.

Her knees braced on either side of him, and then they lost themselves in each other.

*

The laughter and rattling noises of children echoed through the narrow alley, mingling with the clatter of distant footsteps and street vendors calling out their wares.

Kazem walked steadily through the alley, passing rows of brick buildings. His boots struck against the cobblestones until he reached the school, a proud symbol of modern education, one of the first of its kind in Iran

The wrought-iron gate stood open, and children darted across the yard in bursts of energy, their shouts blending into chaotic but joyful symphony.

Kazem walked through the yard. He stepped into the main building. The hallway was vibrant with the colors of children's artwork, painting of animals, flowers, and clumsy portraits adhered to walls.

And then he saw her.

Nahid stood at the far end of the corridor, with light brown hair and honey-colored eyes.

She was speaking softly to a young boy who clutched a slate in his small hands. The boy no older than eight, listened to the woman in her mid-twenties.

"Nahid," Kazem called out, his voice steady but warm.

Nahid turned at the sound of his voice, her eyes lighting up. Before she could respond, the boy's excited voice echoed through the hallway.

"Dad! Mom! Daddy is here!" Mahdi shouted, gesturing eagerly toward Kazem.

Kazem's chest tightened at the sight of his son's joy.

Mahdi ran toward Kazem. He knelt just in time to catch him, wrapping his arms

around his son as the boy beamed up at him.

"Dad, look what I got!" Mahdi exclaimed, showing a slate to his father. "A star!"

"Good job, son!" he said, ruffling Mahdi's hair. "One day, you'll become a doctor."

Mahdi's eyes gleamed with a pride at his father's praise.

As Kazem stood, Nahid approached. "Hello, dear," she greeted, her voice soft and affectionate.

Kazem's gaze met hers. "How's he doing?" he asked, a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Brilliant as always," Nahid responded with pride.

Kazem reached for her hand, his thumb brushing against her knuckles in a quiet, intimate gesture. "And you?" he asked softly. "How are you?"

Nahid's smile softened. "Better now that you're here."

The warmth between them lingered, unspoken but evident. Kazem felt a sense of peace as he held Nahid's hand.

He cleared his throat, his voice slightly hesitant. "Maybe we can go out to the garden nearby after your class is over?"

"Of course, my love," she responded, spotting the faint blush creeping across his cheeks and smiling gently. Kazem's blush deepened, but her smile made it only easier to hold her gaze.

After the class was over, the family left the school together. Kazem walked in middle, holding Mahdi's small hand in his left and Nahid's warm hand in his right. Their steps were steady as they made their way through the streets and alleys of Tabriz.

Finally, they reached one of Tabriz's most famous gardens. Tall clay walls

bordered the serene space, and at the far end of the garden stood the imposing walls and towers of Arg-e-Alishah. The earthy path crunched beneath their feet as they walked through rows of trees whose branches stretched toward the sky.

They found a bench beneath one of the older trees and sat down. Kazem released Nahid's hand, the weight of the day lifting slightly as he watched the tranquility of the garden unfold around them. A group of children laughed as they chased one another with a boundless energy.

"Mom, Dad, can I play with them?" Mahdi asked, his eyes filled with excitement.

Nahid smiled softly, her voice warm and soothing. "Alright, honey, but don't go too far."

With a delighted shout, Mahdi darted toward the other children. Kazem

watched his son with a rare smile, his heart lightened by the moment.

Kazem's thoughts drifted, dark and restless. The peaceful sounds of the garden faded into the background as his mind returned to the city, the raids and faces flashed before him, shadowy and indistinct, until one face stood out among them.

His brother.

The memory weighed heavily on him. Reza's last moments lingered in his mind, the urgency in his voice, the way his eyes dimmed

"Kazem... Kazem!" Nahid's voice pulled him back, her hand gently gripping his arm.

"What? What's the matter?" Kazem asked, blinking as he returned to the present.

"Still thinking about him?" Nahid asked.
"Or is it the job again?"

"It's nothing," Kazem muttered, looking away. "I was just thinking."

Nahid's brow furrowed slightly. Her voice was gentle but filled with concern. "Stop thinking then. Let the job stay at work."

After a short silence she continued. "And let your brother rest in peace."

Kazem's jaw clenched, his eyes hardening. "I want justice."

Nahid exhaled. "You don't want justice, you want revenge."

"It's all the same," Kazem shot back, his voice low and firm. "The killers must pay."

"You are impossible, Kazem."

Kazem looked at her, noticing the worry in her eyes. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, his voice soft. "Don't

worry, everything will be alright. I'll make sure of it."

Nahid looked at him for a moment before nodding, though the concern in her eyes lingered.

*

The scent of tobacco and stale alcohol hung heavy in the air, mingling with the low, melancholy notes of music echoing from a gramophone in the corner. The bar was dimly lit and nearly empty, save for a few heartbroken or defeated men slouched over their drinks.

Amir pushed the door open, the hinges creaking as the smell hit his nostrils, a reminder of places where regrets come to drown. He scanned the room briefly, then made his way toward the counter, his steps measured.

A tall, fit man in a crisp black suit sat at the counter, his posture straight, exuding an air of pride and arrogance. His face,

sharp and clean-shaven, bore the look of someone accustomed to commanding attention. The man glanced at Amir, his expression unreadable, then turned toward the barman. "Two whiskies," he said, dropping two coins onto the counter with a casual flick of his wrist.

"It's been almost a year, mister Amir," the man said, a thin, insincere smile at his lips. "I hear it was a rough year for communism-and for you."

Amir's eyes turned cold, his expression hard as stone. "It was... Javid," he replied evenly. "And I'm not part of any group. Stop calling me a communist."

Javid's smile widened slightly. "I know. I heard about the tragic incident. But I also hear you give as good as you get."

Amir's voice was sharp. "Get to the point. Why did you want to see me?"

"I know you're looking for revenge, and I'll help you fulfill it," Javid said, the smile never wavering. He grabbed the small glass of whiskey and downed it in one breath, slamming it back on the counter with a faint clink. "It's time we gather our forces and invade Tehran. The court is weak, It's just matter of guns and numbers."

Amir's eyes widened, but he quickly masked it. "You've become bold," he said evenly. "But I guess you won't let me have my revenge and freedom without asking for something in return."

Javid's smile widened. "You're clever, mister Amir." He leaned in, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial tone. "You have to eliminate someone."

"You filthy bastards," Amir muttered, his voice low but sharp. "I always hated your idea of this fake democracy and capitalism. But it doesn't matter. Not anymore."

Javid's smile lingered as he swirled the empty whiskey glass in his hand.

"Who's the target?" Amir asked flatly.

"Ismael," Javid responded. "A student from Qom turned into a moderate leader. Now he runs the group operating near Tabriz."

"And how much time do I have?"

"Enough," Javid replied simply, his tone smooth and confident.

Chapter III

The band sat around a table in the dimly lit room, the air thick with tension. A single lantern flickered above, casting long shadows across their grim faces. Amir's gaze was fixed on the cellar door, his mind lost in thought. Yasaman, seated beside him, toyed with her bracelet, her sharp eyes flickering toward Amir every now and then.

They were waiting.

Finally, the cellar door creaked open, and Kamal emerged, his breath ragged from exertion. All eyes turned to him as he made his way to the table. His face was flushed from the cold, drops of sweat glistening on his forehead.

He steadied himself and spoke. "Their base is well fortified. It's an abandoned factory with guards posted all around it. I couldn't find any clear patterns to slip through unnoticed, but..." He paused,

catching his breath. "Every evening, before dawn, three guards leave the place to get provisions with their mounts.

Amir stood, grabbing his gun from the table. "Good job, Kamal," he said, his voice steady.

He looked at the group, his expression cold and determined. "We'll ambush those three guards and take their outfits. Then we'll take the provisions and enter the factory. Once we're inside..." His voice hardened. "We finish the job."

There was a brief silence. Then Amir asked, "Any questions?" His gaze swept over the room.

The group nodded in agreement.

"Good," Amir said, his voice firm. "Ali, Hasan, you're with me. Kamal, go and rest, you've earned it. Yasaman, you'll stay in the hideout.

Yasaman abruptly stood, her eyes flashing with defiance. "What? You're leaving me here? Sitting and doing nothing?" She shook her head sharply. "I'm not letting you go alone."

"I'm not alone," Amir said calmly. "I have Ali and Hasan." He stepped closer, his tone softening slightly. "Besides, you won't be sitting and doing nothing. You'll secure a safe passage for us when we return and keep this place secure."

"But, " Yasaman's voice rose, her frustration evident.

"No buts," Amir cut her off. "You will do as I say."

The word hung in the air, heavy and final. Yasaman's jaw tightened, her eyes swirling with a mix of anger and hurt. Slowly, she sank back into her chair, her gaze fixed on the corner of the room.

Amir noticed the flicker of pain in her expression. He approached her, kneeling

slightly to meet her eyes. "Yasaman," he said gently, taking her hand. His voice was slow, meant only for her. "I will be back. I promise."

She gave a reluctant nod, though her eyes remained guarded.

Without another word, Amir stood, his grip tightening briefly around her hand before letting go. He turned to the others. "Let's move."

The group gathered their weapons and gear, and left the hideout.

The fog clung to the narrow streets, swirling like ghosts around the dim glow of oil lamps. Amir stood motionless in the middle of the lifeless road, his breath steady despite the cold biting at his skin.

In the distance, the rhythmic clatter of hooves echoed through the silence. The three riders emerged slowly from the mist, their figures dark against the pale fog.

As they spotted Amir blocking their path, one of them barked, "Are you blind?"

The other scoffed, tightening his grip on the reins. "Move aside!"

Amir didn't flinch. He simply lifted his head, locking eyes with the rider for a brief, tense moment.

The guard's expression twisted in suspicion. He reached for his rifle,

Before he could act, Hasan and Ali struck from the sides, dragging the riders down

in swift, brutal motions. Amir seized the one in the middle, his arm locking tightly around the man's throat. The struggle was brief, desperate gasps fading into silence as the guards' bodies went limp.

Without hesitation, they stripped the men of their uniforms, fastening the heavy coats and belts over their own clothing. Amir adjusted the collar of his stolen jacket, then swung himself onto one of the horses.

The mist thickened as they rode off, the stolen provisions secure, their next move clear.

"Open the gate! They're back!" one of the guards shouted at the sight of three riders approaching through the mist.

The heavy metal gate groaned as it swung open. A man stepped forward, eyeing them suspiciously. "What took you so long?"

Amir didn't hesitate. "We ran into some thieves on the way," he said, his voice deep and steady. "But we took care of them."

The guard nodded, waving them through. "Alright, don't keep the boss waiting."

I won't. Neither will death, Amir thought coldly.

They rode into the factory yard, dismounting swiftly. The place was dimly lit, a hive of activity. Armed men moved with purpose, their hands occupied with crates, ledgers, and weapons. Conversations hummed through the air, but no one paid Amir and his companions any mind.

Perfect.

His sharp eyes scanned the surroundings, searching for any sign of leadership.

Then he saw it, a lone room, tucked away in the far corner of the second floor.

Unlike the open chaos of the factory floor, this one was isolated, guarded by its position.

This was it. It's going to be clean and easy.

Or so he thought.

"Ali, Hasan, guard the door. No one gets in or out," Amir ordered, his voice low and firm.

They nodded, taking their positions as Amir stepped inside.

Ismael sat behind a worn wooden desk, speaking in hushed tones to a young boy who couldn't have been older than eighteen. The room was dimly lit, the air thick with the scent of old books and burning oil.

Ismael glanced up at Amir, his expression calm, almost welcoming. "How may I help you, brother?" His voice was gentle and steady.

Amir barely spared the boy a glance. "You better leave, kid," he said, his tone flat.

The boy hesitated, looking between Amir and Ismael. "What's the matter? You want to speak in private?"

Amir clenched his jaw. He didn't want to do this in front of the boy, didn't want to harm him, either. But time was running short.

Without another word, he drew his pistol and aimed it at Ismael.

They boy's eyes widened in shock, his body frozen. But Ismael didn't flinch. His gaze remained steady, as if he had expected this moment.

"I knew it," he murmured. "The democrats won't rest until they see me dead."

Then, in one sudden motion, he lunged, flipping the heavy desk between them.

Amir stepped forward, ready to shoot, but the boy was moving too, reaching for Amir's arm. The gun wavered as they struggled, the cold metal pressing against shifting hands.

In the chaos, Ismael shoved the window open. The air rushed in.

Amir cursed, he couldn't let him escape.

"God damn it, kid, stop!" Amir barked, his voice sharp with urgency.

But the boy didn't listen. His hand trembled as he fought to wrestle the gun from Amir's grip, his desperation fueling his struggle.

Amir shoved him back, the gunshot exploded through the room.

Both of them froze. Amir's ears rang from the deafening echo, his pulse hammering in his skull. His eyes darted around, searching for the bullet's path, unsure if he had been hit.

Then he saw it.

The boy staggered, his body swaying as if reality had just caught up to him. Blood spread across his stomach. His lips parted, but no words came, just a soft, pained groan as he collapsed onto the floor.

Amir stood motionless. His chest felt heavy, his stomach twisted into knots. He didn't want this.

All the men he had killed, all the blood on his hands, yet this one felt different. It shouldn't have. But it did. The same sickening weight he had felt when he first took a life clawed its way back into his gut.

A sudden voice snapped him back to reality.

"Mister Amir, what happened?"

Amir turned to see Ali stepping into the room, his gaze flicking between Amir and the dying boy.

"Where is Ismael?!" Hasan rushed in, eyes staring at the boy on the floor before snapping to Amir. "The whole factory heard the shot!"

Amir swallowed the guilt and steadied himself. Ismael was getting away. That was all that mattered now.

"No time to waste," he said, his voice sharp. "He jumped out the window. Keep his men busy. I'll go after him."

Ali and Hasan exchanged a brief glance, but neither argued. They moved swiftly, positioning themselves defensively as Amir strode toward the open window. Without hesitation, he leaped out into the night.

Ismael ran desperately through the yard, his breathing ragged as he climbed the fence, vaulting into the dark, empty alleys of Tabriz.

Amir sprinted after him, his boots pounding against the dirt, cutting through the narrow streets like a shadow.

Ismael leaped over piles of straw, scrambled over short brick walls, and darted through wooden fences, his movements fueled by sheer panic. But in his blind escape, he failed to realize, he was running toward a dead end.

Amir kept pace, his muscles burning, his lungs tight. Just as he feared he might lose him, he saw Ismael skid to a halt at the end of the alley.

A high fence blocked his way.

Ismael turned, his breath coming in sharp gasps. He wouldn't make it over the fence before Amir reached him.

His fingers fumbled for his gun. If he couldn't outrun Amir, he would have to kill him

As Amir rounded the corner, a sudden gunshot split the air.

Amir cursed and ducked behind a stack of crates as bullets tore into the walls around him, dust and splinters flying. Ismael kept firing, each shot wild but desperate, forcing Amir to stay pinned.

Amir exhaled slowly, tightening his grip on his own gun.

He had hunted men before. But something told him, this wouldn't be as simple as pulling the trigger.

"You're at a dead end, Ismael. Don't make this harder than it needs to be," Amir called out, taking a quick glimpse at his target's position. His voice was steady, but his patience was thinning. "I promise, I'll make it quick."

Ismael, crouched behind a stack of crates, let out a bitter laugh. "You think you can stop us, you filthy Democrat? Another fool brainwashed by the west." His voice was laced with defiance. "Even if you kill me, my brothers will fight to the last man." He steadied his grip on the gun. "And it's clear, God is on the side of the righteous."

Amir returned fire, forcing Ismael to duck further into cover. "Who said I'm a Democrat?" Amir muttered. "I'm here for personal reasons."

Ismael fired back blindly. "An assassin, then? Or just a man who has lost his purpose?"

Amir exhaled, stepping out of cover. "I have my purpose." He squeezed the trigger, firing as he advanced. Bullets tore through the wooden crates, splinters flying. Ismael barely had time to shield himself, pressing tight against the cold brick wall.

By the time he turned toward Amir, it was too late. Amir stood over him, his own pistol aimed at Ismael's head.

"It's nothing personal." Amir said, his voice flat. "I just have to do it."

He pulled the trigger. First a click, then silence.

Amir's eyes flickered in surprise. Empty.

The realization hit them both at the same time. With a snarl, Ismael lunged.

He slammed Amir against the wall, gripping him tightly as he drove his fist into Amir's stomach, once, twice, before swinging a punch toward his face.

Amir grunted, twisting his body to absorb the hit. He threw his elbow at Ismael's ribs, but the man refused to let go. Another punch came for Amir's jaw, and as Ismael reared back for a third, Amir ducked, then retaliated with a vicious knee to the groin.

Ismael gasped, his grip faltering for just a second, enough time for Amir to land a brutal punch to his face.

Staggering back, Ismael wiped blood from his lip. Their eyes locked, both breathing hard.

And then, they charged.

Their bodies collided, slamming into each other with a sheer force, each man struggling to gain the upper hand.
Gritted teeth. Locked arms. Muscles burning.

Ismael snarled and drove his knee into Amir's groin. Pain shot through Amir's body, but he didn't let it drop him, instead, he threw his head forward, smashing his forehead into Ismael's nose.

Ismael stumbled back, blood dripping down his face. Amir took a shaky breath, steadying himself. Neither man backed down.

Suddenly, the door behind Ismael creaked open. A blonde woman stepped out hesitantly, drawn by the sounds of the struggle. Her curious gaze barely had time to register the scene before Ismael moved.

In a flash, he grabbed his knife.

Amir lunged to stop him, but it was too late, Ismael seized the woman, yanking her close and pressing the knife to her neck.

She gasped, eyes wide with terror.

"Let me go, or I'll kill her," Ismael growled, his breathing ragged.

Amir stood still, his fingers twitching toward his belt. His voice came out cold, calculated.

"What makes you think I care about her?"

Ismael smirked. "Ohhh, I see it in your eyes. You're not going to let an innocent person die, are you?"

Amir's jaw clenched, but his gaze drifted toward the woman, her blue eyes filled with fear, her body trembling.

Something flickered inside him.

An old feeling. One he hadn't allowed himself in years.

For a moment, he saw her, not as a hostage, but as a person.

His hands rose instinctively.

Then, hoofbeats. Footsteps echoed through the narrow streets, growing closer.

Ismael saw his chance.

With a sharp shove, he threw the woman into Amir, sending them both collapsing to the ground.

By the time Amir regained his footing, Ismael was already sprinting toward the approaching riders. Before Amir could react, gunfire erupted.

With a sharp order from Ismael, bullets tore through the air, striking crates, brick walls, and the dusty ground, kicking up clouds of debris.

A bullet grazed the woman's neck, drawing a sharp gasp from her, but she wasn't the main target, Amir was.

Pain seared through his body as one bullet sliced through his shoulder, another ripped across his leg, and a third dug a deep laceration into his side. Gritting his teeth, he grabbed the woman's wrist and yanked her toward the door she had come from. He slammed it shut behind him.

Breathing hard, Amir turned to her. She was pressing a trembling hand to her neck, blood seeping through her fingers.

"Hey, are you alright?" Amir asked, his voice tight with concern.

She swallowed, trying to steady herself. "I, yes, I'm alright," she said, though the pain in her voice betrayed her.

"What's your name?" Amir asked, his breath still heavy.

"S, Sophia," she stammered.

Amir's eyes widened slightly. A foreigner.

Amir steadied himself and replied. "Don't worry, Sophia, we'll get out of this mess."

Sophia's eyes narrowed slightly. "Who are those men? Who are you?"

Amir exhaled sharply, pain flashing in his own eyes. "My name is Amir, and it's a long story."

Gunfire rattled outside. No time.

"Do you know a way out?" Amir pressed.
"Because they won't show mercy to
either of us."

Sophia nodded quickly. "This is the pharmacy I work in. The main door is on the opposite side."

"Then let's move. It's only a matter of time before they go around."

She turned, running toward the main door, Amir limping behind her. He could feel his leg burning, but he pushed forward.

Sophia yanked the door open, and they stumbled into the cold night.

Then, they heard the hoofbeats again. Echoing in the empty streets, growing louder.

Amir's grip tightened around Sophia's wrist. "Follow me. We have to get out of here!" he barked.

Through winding alleys and narrow streets, their footsteps pounded against the dirt, their breath coming in ragged gasps. But the riders were faster. Then,

gunfire erupted. Bullets whizzed past them, splintering wooden stalls and ricocheting off stone.

Sophia screamed, her body trembling. Amir yanked her closer, shielding her as best he could. Out of desperation, he veered off the main streets, dragging her toward the hills, toward the mountains.

"They're heading for the mountains!" one of the riders barked.

"Come on. We're going on foot."

One man dismounted first, his boots hitting the dirt hard as he started after them. The others followed, their silhouettes moving swiftly under the moonlight.

Amir and Sophia pushed deeper into the hills.

Gunfire cracked behind them. The rough, uneven ground saved them, the chase

had turned into battle of endurance, not speed.

Amir's breath was ragged, pain burning through his shoulder and leg. He couldn't keep this pace forever.

Then, he spotted a cave, carved into the side of a cliff, barely visible in the darkness.

"Come on!" he hissed, gripping Sophia's arm and pulling her toward it.

They slipped inside, pressing their backs against the cold rock, their breath heavy in the silence.

"We wait here until they leave," Amir muttered, peering through the cave's narrow opening.

*

The office door burst open.

Ismael stumbled inside, his face and hands covered in blood. His breath was ragged, his eyes wild.

"Wait! Mr. Kazem does not want to be interrupted!" Omid barked, grabbing Ismael's arm.

"It's okay, Omid. Let him in." Kazem's voice was calm, unreadable. He didn't move, merely watching as Ismael steadied himself against the door frame.

Omid hesitated, then stepped aside.

Ismael swallowed hard. "The factory, " he gasped.

Kazem's brow furrowed. "What happened?"

"An attack. Many of my men are dead." Ismael's hands tightened into fists. "You need to send officers. Their families must know."

Kazem's jaw tensed. "I told you, this fight is between you and the Democrats. The law forbids me from meddling in your wars."

"It wasn't them." Ismael's voice was firm.
"It was just a small group. And a man."
He exhaled sharply. "A very dangerous man."

Kazem leaned forward, his sharp eyes narrowing. "Describe him."

Ismael swallowed. "Dark hair. Stubble. A worn-out look in his eyes. A scar on his right cheek."

Kazem's fingers tapped against the wooden desk, his mind assembling the pieces.

"Did he say his name?"

"No, but he claimed he wasn't with the Democrats. Either he is an assassin or, "

"Or a communist," Kazem cut him, his eyes narrowed. "No, an ex-communist."

Ismael straightened. "The moderated are recognized party now. We have a place in the government. But this man? He's nothing but a chaos we're trying to leave behind."

Kazem's thoughts drifted back, to old records, old cases. And a name.

Chapter IV

Hours passed, but the sound outside didn't fade. They could hear the distant shouts and footsteps.

They were still searching.

Amir clenched his teeth against the pain in his side. The wound was bad, deeper than he realized.

"You should sleep," he said, his voice low.
"I'll keep watch."

Sophia hesitated. She could see the strain in his face, the way he was trying to hide his pain.

"You're hurt," she whispered.

Amir exhaled sharply, forcing a smirk. "I've had worse."

She didn't believe him. But she was exhausted, and they both knew it.

Slowly, she lay down on the hard cave floor, watching him through half-lidded eyes until sleep finally took her.

Amir remained where he was, staring out into the night, waiting.

And bleeding.

A dim sliver of light crept through the narrow cave entrance, casting faint shadows against the damp stone walls.

Sophia's eyelids were heavy, her body aching with exhaustion, but a deep sense of unease forced her awake.

She turned her head, and spotted Amir lying against the cave wall.

"Amir!" she whispered, her voice hoarse. No response.

"Amir!" this time louder, but still no response.

Panic stirred in her chest. She pushed herself forward, crawling across the rough ground toward him.

She reached for his arm, shaking him gently at first. "Amir, wake up!"

Still nothing.

Her fingers dug into his sleeve as she shook him harder. "Please, don't do this. Don't leave me here, I don't know what to do."

Her voice wavered between fear and desperation.

Still, no answer. No movement.

Tears burned in her eyes as she pressed two trembling fingers to his neck.

For a terrifying moment, there was nothing. Then, a faint, weak pulse.

Relief flooded her, but it was short-lived. His breathing was shallow. He wouldn't last without treatment.

She swallowed hard. She had to do something.

Sophia's eyes scanned Amir's body, her breath unsteady.

His wounds, his shoulder, side, and leg, were still open, the dried blood caked around torn flesh. The bleeding had stopped, but the wounds were unclean, exposed to infection.

If she didn't act soon, he wouldn't survive.

She had to find water. Food. Herbs. And if she was lucky, help.

Taking a deep breath, Sophia rose to her feet and carefully stepped toward the cave entrance. She moved slowly, mindful of the rough stone and jagged edges, making sure her light blue dress, patterned with small flowers, didn't catch on the sharp textures of the mountain.

Outside, the morning air was crisp and biting.

She took her time descending the rocky slope, gripping onto stones and ledges to keep her balance. Her hands stung as they scraped against rough surfaces, but she barely noticed. Survival was all that mattered now.

Then, she heard a soft, rhythmic trickling.

Sophia froze, her heartbeat quickening.

She held her breath, tilting her head to listen carefully. The sound was gentle but steady, a mountain stream. And if she was lucky, it would be clean.

Hope surged through her. She followed the sound, pushing forward through uneven terrain. Then, she saw it.

Water snaking through the rocks, alistening under the morning sun.

Relief flooded her, and she broke into a run. Her foot caught against a loose stone.

She gasped as she fell forward, the sharp impact knocking the air from her lungs. Dust clung to her palms. Her dress now stained with dirt.

But she didn't stop. She couldn't.

Sophia dropped to her knees beside the steam, her throat raw from thirst. She plunged her hands into the water, but the icy shock made her gasp.

Her fingers trembled, but the desperation was stronger than the cold. She drank deeply, the freezing water stinging her dry throat.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, her breath coming in shaky bursts. That's when she noticed the moss and damp patches along the rocks.

Her eyes widened.

She quickly reached for it, pressing a handful against the wound on her neck. The cold stung, but she gritted teeth, letting it cleanse the wound. She squeezed water over the gash, wincing as the liquid ran down her skin, but at least it was clean.

Amir needs both water and these mosses. I need to take them to him.

Next, she scanned the area, looking for something, anything, to carry the water. Most of the leaves nearby were dry and brittle, already shed by the trees, but near the base of a twisted old tree, she spotted a few broad, leathery leaves still clinging to their branches. They weren't as fresh as summer leaves, but they would have to do.

She pulled them down, testing their flexibility. Then, layering them together, she reinforced them with thin strips of bark to make a more durable poach.

Using slender sticks, she tied the edges together, securing the shape.

The pouch was crude, but it held.

She scooped up damp leaves, then carefully poured the ice-cold water into her makeshift container.

A harsh wind swept through the valley, cutting through her thin dress like a knife. She shivered, her limbs aching, but she clutched the pouch tightly.

With a deep breath, Sophia turned and hurried back toward the cave. Each step felt heavier, the cold sinking into her bones. But she forced herself forward.

Sophia rushed inside the cave, her breath coming in uneven gasps as she knelt beside Amir.

She dipped her hands into the cold water she had carried and gently washed the dried blood from his leg and shoulder.

Then, she pressed the cool, damp moss over them, hoping it would keep infection at bay.

But then, his side.

She hesitated before removing his coat, revealing the wound beneath.

Her stomach dropped.

The flesh around it had turned yellowish, swollen, an infection had already begun.

Moss wouldn't help him now.

Her pulse quickened. She needed fire to burn the infection out.

Without wasting a second, she rushed outside, ignoring the cold, scanning the rocky terrain for anything that could burn.

After what felt like an eternity of frantic searching, she found some dry sticks beneath a cluster of rocks, where the wind hadn't yet stolen their dryness.

Hugging them against her chest, she hurried inside.

Dropping the sticks just inside the cave entrance, she turned back to Amir.

Her hands searched his pockets, then his belt. Finally, her fingers brushed against a knife.

She pulled it out, her grip firm despite her trembling hands.

Grabbing a flat stone from the cave floor, she moved toward the pile of sticks and knelt beside them.

She took a deep breath. Then, gripping the knife, she struck the blade against the stone, aiming at the dry wood.

Sparks flickered. She tried again. And again.

The fourth time, a tiny ember caught on a twig.

Sophia leaned in, blowing gently, coaxing it to life.

The dry sticks began to smolder, then crackle. Flames rose.

She exhaled. But there was no time to celebrate. The hardest part was still ahead.

She turned to Amir. The knife needed to be heated. There was no other way.

Sophia placed the knife into the flames, watching as the metal slowly turned a deep, glowing red.

Minutes passed.

Heat radiated from the blade, distorting the air around it. When the handle became too hot to touch, she knew it was ready.

Her heart pounded.

She turned to Amir, still unconscious. Without hesitation, she pressed the searing iron against the wound.

A sickening hiss filled the cave, and Amir's body jerked violently, a hoarse groan escaping his lips, but he didn't wake.

Sophia gritted her teeth, forcing herself to keep the blade steady.

Finally, she pulled the knife away. The wound was now blackened, sealed shut, the infection burned out.

Shaking, she grabbed the water and washed it as best she could. Then, carefully, she pressed the last of the moss over it.

The fire near the entrance crackled softly, casting flickering shadows on the cave walls. The warmth barely reached her, but she didn't care.

Exhaustion crashed over her. Her body felt too heavy to move.

Without thinking, she collapsed beside Amir, resting her head against his stomach. His breathing was slow, uneven, but steady.

That was enough.

Her eyes fluttered shut and she slept.

*

Sophia gasped awake, her body tensing at the faint sound of movement.

Her eyes darted around the cave, her breath still uneven from exhaustion.

Then she saw that Amir's coat was beneath her head, a makeshift pillow.

She blinked in surprise, then turned her gaze toward the fire.

Amir was there.

He was kneeling beside the flames, the firelight flickering against his face. His wounds still looked rough, but he was awake, alive.

He glanced toward her, meeting her eyes.

"Hey," Amir said softly, his voice low, rough, but gentle. "Saw what you did. Thanks."

She nodded, but before she could speak, Amir stood and walked toward her. A piece of cooked meat rested at the tip of his knife.

"Here," he said, offering it to her. "Hunted a rabbit while you were sleeping."

Sophia grabbed the cooked meat and ate hungrily, tearing into it with the kind of hunger only the near-starved know.

Amir sat beside her, watching in silence. His mind wandered.

Another victim of my actions. Another pained soul because of my choices.

Sophia caught him staring. She paused, turning her gaze toward him.

Amir quickly looked away, pretending to focus on the fire.

She hesitated, then forced herself to slow down, eating in a more careful, composed manner.

For a moment, neither spoke. The only sounds were the crackling flames and the distant howling of the wind.

Then, Amir broke the silence.

"So, a foreigner huh?" he muttered, still staring at the fire. "Where are you from?"

"German Empire," Sophia said between bites. "Brandenburg."

Amir nodded slowly. "Figures."

Sophia swallowed the last chunk of meat and wiped her mouth. "I was sent by the ambassador to work in a Germaninvested pharmacy."

"Yeah, I heard about that pharmacy." Amir said. "Germany started investing

here to counter British and Russian influence."

Sophia raised an eyebrow. "Really? I didn't know. I'm not really into politics."

Amir smirked faintly, shaking his head. "Must be nice."

A brief silence passed. Then, her voice softened.

"So... why were you fighting that man?"

Amir's smirk faded.

"And who were those men after us?"

Amir was caught off guard.

He knew this question would come sooner or later, but now that it had, he didn't know what to say.

What should he tell her?

That he was an ex-communist, chasing a war that no longer existed?

That he spent years killing men in the name of revenge?

That he was nothing more than a ghost wandering between gunfire and vengeance?

The more he thought about it, the more foolish it all seemed.

Was it really what my life has become?

Going after Shah.

Killing people.

Getting people killed.

Maybe his life could have been different. Maybe, in another time, another world, he wouldn't be sitting in a cold cave, covered in dried blood, hiding like an animal.

A long silence passed.

Finally, he spoke.

"That man was a gang leader," Amir said, his voice steady. "He and I had a business dispute. Things turned ugly. You know the rest."

A lie. A clean one. One he hated telling, but had to, for now.

Sophia studied him for a moment, as if sensing there was more. But she didn't push. Instead, she asked. "After we get out of this mess... will they still come after me?"

Amir exhaled through his nose, rubbing his temple.

"Maybe. They're dangerous men. Their real target is me, but if they think hurting you will get to me, they won't hesitate."

Sophia swallowed, shifting slightly. Her unease was clear. "So, what do we do?"

Amir's gaze darkened. "We lay low. Disappear for a while. Eventually, they'll stop looking for us."

Sophia nodded, but her expression didn't change. She wasn't reassured.

And deep down, Amir knew, he wasn't either.

After a long silence, Amir exhaled and pushed himself up. His body protested, stiff, aching, but there was no time to dwell on it.

He turned to Sophia and offered his hand.

"We should get moving," he said. "We need to find civilization before nightfall."

Sophia hesitated for a moment, then placed her hand in his.

Her grip was smaller, colder, but steady.

With a quiet nod, she pulled herself up, and without another word, they stepped out of the cave together.

The world outside was stretches of rugged hills, empty skies, and an uncertain path ahead.

But there was no turning back.

Amir and Sophia walked through the rocky hills, their steps slow and unsteady. They followed where water would naturally flow, weaving between boulders and dry riverbeds. The sharp, unforgiving wind cut through their clothes, chilling them to the bone.

Hours passed, the hills and mountains stretching endlessly before them, when Amir's keen eyes caught something, a narrow dirt path winding down the slope. He gestured toward it. "A road," he muttered, more to himself than to Sophia.

As they stepped onto the path, Amir crouched and ran his fingers across the earth. Wagon tracks. Fresh ones.
Someone had passed through recently.

But night crept in too fast. The chill deepened and exhaustion weighed on their limbs. With no shelter in sight, they gathered what little dry wood they could find and lit a small fire. The flickering flames cast long shadows, dancing against the rocks.

Sophia sat close, hugging herself for warmth. Amir glanced at her, then silently unfastened his coat and dropped it over her shoulders. She hesitated, then leaned against his arm. Neither spoke. The crackling fire and wind howling through the hills were the only sound between them.

By dawn, the fire had burned down to embers. Sophia stirred first, shifting under Amir's coat. He blinked awake, stretching his limbs, they began walking again.

After a while, Amir spoke.

"I grew up in Tabriz, you know," he said, his voice casual but tinged with something distant.

Sophia glanced at him, interested. "Really?" What was it like?"

Amir sighed, "Busy, crowded. The streets always smelled like bread and smoke. My father was a travelling salesman, selling headgear that my mother tailored at home. I learned a lot from him." He chuckled. "You could learn more about a man by the way he argued over a cap than by talking to him for an hour."

Sophia smiled. "Sounds lively. I grew up in Brandenburg. It's... quieter. My father was a schoolteacher, my mother took care of us. I have three brothers and a younger sister. You can imagine how chaotic our house was."

"Yeah, that explains a lot." Amir teased.

Sophia let out a small laugh. "They toughened me up, that's for sure. But they also spoiled me. Always trying to scare off anyone who so much as looked at me." She shook her head with a smile.

"And my little sister? She could get away with anything."

"Smart girl," Amir smirked.

"She is." Sophia replied.

Amir grinned but then looked ahead, his expression growing softer. "Family's a strange thing. You don't realize how much you miss them until they're gone."

Sophia caught the weight in his voice, so she nudged him lightly. "You're young. Maybe one day, you'll start one."

Amir let out a dry chuckle. "Maybe. If I don't get myself killed first."

"That's not funny."

"I thought it was," he said with a smirk.

Sophia sighed dramatically. "You have a terrible sense of humor."

Amir opened his mouth to say something, but stopped abruptly, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

"Smoke," he murmured.

Sophia followed his line of sight. A thin, steady plume was rising in the distance.

Then, they heard a faint but unmistakable bray of a donkey, and the clucking of chickens.

Sophia's fingers unconsciously gripped Amir's sleeve. He looked down at her, and she whispered, barely believing it herself: "We made it."

Amir and Sophia followed the narrow dirt path into the village, their footsteps kicking up dust. Mud-brick houses, sturdy but modest, lined the winding paths. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys, carrying the scent of fresh bread and damp earth. A few villagers paused their work to watch them, their gazes wary.

At the center of the village, an elder sat on a low stool, chewing the stem of a dried plant. His sharp eyes flickered

between Amir and Sophia, taking in their worn clothes and tired faces.

"You're not from around here," the elder said, his voice rough with age. "What do you want?"

Amir took a step forward. "A place to stay. Just for a while. We'll work for it."

The elder studied them. "What work?"

"I can build, hunt, repair."

The elder's gaze shifted to Sophia. "And you?"

She hesitated for a moment before answering. "I was trained in medicine. I can help with the sick."

After a long silence, the elder nodded. "You work, you stay."

Amir and Sophia exchanged a smile. A villager then led them toward their new shelter. It was a tiny hut on the outskirts

of the village, but it was warm, sturdy, and most importantly, safe.

Days fell into a rhythm. Amir spent his mornings chopping wood, repairing broken carts, and helping the shepherds, while Sophia tended to fevers and wounds. She quickly earned the villagers' trust, and in return, they shared their food and stories with her.

One evening Amir returned to their shack, exhausted but content. The rich scent of soup filled the air, mingling with the cool night breeze. Sophia was crouched over the fire, stirring the pot with focus.

"It smells good," Amir said, stepping inside and shrugging off his coat.

Sophia glanced up, a faint smile curving her lips. "It tastes even better."

Amir sat beside her, watching as she carefully ladled some into a wooden bowl. He took a bite, savoring the warmth spreading through him. "You're

right," he said. "You could make a man forget he's ever been hungry before."

Sophia laughed, the sound soft but real. He looked at her then. The firelight cast a glow on her face, and for the first time in a long while, she looked at peace. Without thinking, Amir reached out, brushing a stray lock of her hair behind her ear.

She stilled, their eyes meeting.

"You know," Amir murmured, his voice quieter now, "I never thought I'd find comfort in a place like this. Far away from the city."

Sophia's smile faded into something softer, more thoughtful. "Me neither."

A silence settled, it was filled with warmth. Then, in a quiet motion, Amir leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. He felt her breath hitch, but she didn't pull away. Instead, she turned to

face him fully, eyes searching his, before she closed the space between them.

A month had passed.

Amir wiped sweat from his brow as he carried a load of mud to help repair one of the old village houses. Nearby, Sophia was feeding the chickens. The quiet hum of village life surrounded them, broken by occasional murmurs and distant bleating of goats.

Then, the sound of wooden wheels crunching against the dirt road caught their attention.

Amir straightened, glancing toward the source of the noise, a cart creaking along the path, loaded with sacks of goods.

Curious he stepped forward, waving at the rider.

"Good morning friend," the man greeted, pulling the reins to slow the cart.

"Morning," Amir replied. His eyes flickered to the bags. "Where are you taking these goods?"

"Tabriz," the man answered. "Selling them at the bazaar,"

The name struck Amir. Tabriz. The city he died many times before.

At the sounds of their conversation, Sophia brushed off her hands and stepped beside Amir, listening.

Amir hesitated for only a moment before speaking. "By any chance do you have space for two more passengers?"

The man raised an eyebrow. "You want to go to Tabriz?"

"Yeah," Amir said, glancing at Sophia. "Me and my... partner."

Sophia didn't react at first, but Amir caught the way her eyes softened just slightly at the word.

The rider studied them before nodding. "Of course, friend. Hop on. We'll be on our way soon."

Moment later, Amir and Sophia stood at the edge of the village. The elder, along with a few villagers, gathered to see them off. "You worked hard, both of you," the elder said, his tone gruff yet appreciative. "You'll always have a place here." Sophia smiled softly, giving a nod of gratitude, while Amir clasped the elder's hand firmly. A few of the children Sophia had treated ran up, tugging at her sleeves, their small voices pleading for her to stay. She knelt, ruffling their hair before whispering a gentle farewell. With a final alance at the place that had been their refuge, Amir and Sophia turned and climbed onto the cart. As the wheels creaked forward, the village slowly faded behind them, swallowed by dust and distance.

Hours passed, and as the cart rumbled down the final stretch, Amir caught sight of Tabriz nestled between the mountains, smoke rising from its chimneys. The familiar skyline sent a strange mix of relief and unease through him. They had made it back.

The cart pulled to a stop near the city's outskirts. Amir reached into his pocket, dropping a few coins into the rider's palm before stepping off. He turned and extended his hand to Sophia. She took it, smiling softly, though a shadow of worry lingered in her eyes.

Without a word, Amir guided Sophia through the familiar streets, each step pulling them closer to the pharmacy. The city was alive, merchants shouting, children darting through alleys, the scent of spices and damp earth filling the air. But Amir felt distant from it all.

As they reached the pharmacy's doorstep, Sophia turned to him. "Are you coming in?"

Amir hesitated, then shook his head. "I have something to take care of."

Sophia's smile faltered. "Where are you going?"

"Unfinished business."

A pause. Then, softer, pleading, she said, "Don't go."

Amir exhaled, forcing a smirk to ease the weight in his chest. "I'll come back, I promise."

Sophia searched his face as if memorizing it, as if she knew promises like these didn't always hold. But she nodded.

Amir lingered a moment longer, then turned, hesitating just briefly before stepping away, disappearing into the streets of Tabriz.

*

Detective Kazem," Omid called urgently, stepping into Kazem's dimly lit office. "There's a situation. The Moderates are planning an ambush on a group of Democrats, right in the city. Civilian casualties could be high."

Kazem looked up from his desk, removing his glasses with deliberate slowness. His expression remained unreadable. "Calm down, Omid. Explain."

Omid exhaled sharply. "High Command wants you to talk to Ismael. They need you to stop him before this turns into a massacre."

Kazem leaned back. "Why not just let them kill each other?"

Omid hesitated, then stepped forward. "Because they're planning the ambush near the city center. It's a crowded district... and it's near the school where

your wife teaches. Where your son studies."

Kazem's face hardened. A moment of silence passed before he pushed back his chair and stood, already reaching for his coat.

"Where's Ismael now?"

"A tea shop near Gushchi Gate."

Kazem nodded once. Without another word, he strode past Omid and out the door.

*

Amir's footsteps echoed against the stone walls as he stepped deeper into the hideout. A cold emptiness filled the space where life had once thrived. He turned in a slow circle, scanning the darkened room, bare shelves, dust settling where crates of ammunition and gold had once been stacked.

His chest tightened. Everything was gone.

"Yasaman," he called, his voice steady but urgent. "Ali? Hassan? Kamal?"

Silence. Not even a creak of movement.

His fingers clenched into fists. Where the hell are they?

He paced the empty space, trying to make sense of it. Had they been raided? Had they fled? Or had they simply abandoned him? His mind raced back to the last time he saw them, before the job went sideways.

Javid.

With a deep breath, Amir turned on his heel and headed for the Democrats' safe house. He needed answers. Now.

Amir's steps quickened as he weaved through the bustling streets of Tabriz, his mind racing. Where did they go? Why would they leave without a word? The

questions gnawed at him, but there was no time to dwell, Javid might have answers.

As he neared the Khiyaban gate, the scent of dust and horse sweat filled the air. The streets were alive with merchants calling out prices, women carrying baskets of fresh bread. But Amir wasn't focused on any of that.

His sharp eyes locked onto a small group of men, their hushed conversation barely audible over the street noise.

And there, among them, was Javid.

Amir didn't hesitate. He strode forward, his voice steady but urgent.

"Javid."

Javid turned, his cautious expression shifting into something resembling amusement. He stepped forward, arms slightly outstretched.

"Well, well, well... Look who finally crawled out of the shadows. It's nice to see you alive and kicking, Amir," he said, though his tone lacked any real warmth.

Amir wasn't in the mood for games. "Where are Yasaman, Hassan, Ali, Kamal? Do you know where they went?"

Javid let out a dry chuckle. "Whoa, slow down there, my friend. What are you talking about? After your little assassination job went sideways and you vanished, I haven't seen you or your crew. How the hell am I supposed to know where your people are?"

Amir's jaw tightened. "Then where are they?"

Javid smirked. "That sounds like a question you should be asking yourself."

He started walking, and without thinking, Amir followed.

Javid kept talking, his voice calm, almost casual. "You know, after your job failed, you left me in a mess. A real mess. And you will have to pay for that, my friend. We've done some things together, sure, but this?" He gestured vaguely around them. "This one cost me. Badly."

"How?" Amir pressed, his voice edged with frustration.

Javid stopped, turning to him with a sharp glare. "Because of you, the Moderates don't talk anymore. They shoot. They see us in the streets, they open fire without a second thought. The little balance we had? You destroyed it."

Amir shook his head. "How the hell was I supposed to know that would happen? I didn't want any of this. It just, "

Javid cut him off with a sarcastic laugh. "And you think I wanted this? You think I chose for my men to be hunted in the streets because of your recklessness?" His smirk faded. "But here's the thing, you

fucked up, and you have to pay. That's how this works."

Amir's fists clenched. "I need to find my people."

Javid shrugged. "Not my problem. You fix what you broke first."

Amir felt the anger rising in his chest, his muscles tensing. His patience was wearing thin.

As they walked, Javid suddenly stopped mid-sentence. His gaze snapped to the other side of the street, where a group of men had gathered in front of a tea shop.

His men noticed it too. Without a word, they tensed, hands moving toward their weapons. Across from them, the opposing group mirrored their movements, armed men stepping forward, the tension between them thick as a blade's edge.

And Kazem, was standing among the men facing Javid.

Javid stepped forward with a smirk. "Well, look at this... bands of vermin gathering in the corner."

Ismael, standing at the head of the other group, didn't hesitate. He stepped forward, his voice sharp. "Watch your tongue, bastard. You're the reason this city is burning, and you dare call us vermin?"

Javid's grin didn't waver. "I wasn't the one assassinating group leaders."

"And I wasn't the one sending killers into my own place to have me murdered!" Ismael shot back, his fury barely contained.

Javid chuckled darkly. "Well, then... I suppose we both know how this is going to end."

Before either side could make a move, Kazem stepped between them, raising a hand. "In the name of the law, I order you to stand down!" His voice was firm, but his eyes flicked toward Ismael.

Then, lower, to Ismael alone, he muttered, "We talked about this. You told me you wouldn't act."

Javid's smirk widened. "You talked about it? You really think these cowards have the guts to do anything?"

That was all it took. Ismael's face twisted in rage. "Enough of this!"

His hand shot to his gun.

The first shot cracked through the air.

Chaos erupted.

Amir barely had time to react before bullets flew across the street. He dove, rolling behind a stack of straw bales at the roadside. A second later, Kazem

landed beside him, crouched low. The gunfire drowned out everything else.

Bullets screamed through the narrow street, hammering against stone walls and wooden stalls, sending splinters and dust flying into the air. The standoff had turned into an all-out battle, with Javid's men and Ismael's forces trading relentless gunfire.

Amir pressed himself against the straw bales, breathing hard. Across from him, a man, one of the city's detectives, judging by his uniform, was crouched low, his pistol drawn, eyes scanning the chaos with sharp precision.

A bullet tore through the bale between them, barely missing Amir's ear.

"Shit," Amir muttered, gripping his pistol tighter.

The detective, Kazem, didn't glance at him but barked, "Unless you want to die here, start shooting."

Amir didn't argue. He leaned out and fired twice. One of Ismael's men crumpled to the ground, clutching his shoulder. Kazem fired at the same time, taking down a man from Javid's side who had been creeping around a cart for a better angle.

For a brief moment, they moved in sync, two men who had never met before, instinctively covering each other.

A group of Ismael's fighters advanced from the left. Amir turned, aiming his pistol. Kazem did the same. Their gunfire cut them down before they could get closer.

Kazem ducked back behind cover, reloading. He glanced at Amir for the first time, his brow furrowed.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

Amir hesitated. "Just a man in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Kazem exhaled sharply, clearly too focused on survival to push further. He turned back to the fight, his voice low. "Then don't die. I don't like wasting bullets avenging people I don't know."

Amir almost smirked. If only you knew, he thought. But there was no time for that now.

A rifle cracked from the rooftop. A bullet barely missed them, kicking up dirt near their feet.

"Rooftop!" Amir shouted.

Kazem spun, aimed, and fired in one swift motion. The sniper dropped.

The battle was far from over, but Amir couldn't shake the strange feeling in his gut. He didn't know this detective, and the detective didn't know him. Not yet. But fate, it seemed, had a twisted sense of humor.

The gunfight raged on, echoing through the narrow streets. Smoke and dust choked the air, the acrid scent of gunpowder mixing with the stench of blood.

Amir and Kazem moved together in a silent, unspoken pact, covering each other's blind spots. Each time Amir fired, Kazem followed, their bullets cutting down enemies from both factions. Neither man hesitated. There was no allegiance here, only survival.

A sudden explosion rocked the street as a stray bullet struck a barrel of black powder near the tea shop. The blast sent debris flying, shattering windows and throwing men to the ground. Amir and Kazem were blown backward, landing hard against a broken cart.

Amir's ears rang. His head spun. He forced himself upright, revolver still clutched in his hand. Kazem groaned beside him, shaking off the daze.

Through the thick smoke, Amir saw bodies sprawled across the cobbled street. Javid's men lay still, their weapons limp in dead hands. Ismael's forces had met the same fate. Even Javid and Ismael themselves were motionless, blood pooling beneath them.

The fight was over.

Kazem coughed, pulling himself to his feet. He glanced around, eyes narrowing as he took in the massacre. "Damn..." he muttered.

Amir wiped the sweat from his brow, his grip on his pistol tightening. He turned to Kazem, their eyes finally meeting without the haze of battle between them.

They were the only ones left.

"It's you," Kazem said, his eyes narrowing as recognition dawned. His gaze traced the scar on Amir's right cheek, the wornout cap, the blood-smeared coat.

Amir frowned. "What do you mean? Who are you?"

Kazem took a slow breath, his voice laced with restrained fury. "Excommunist. Imprisoned multiple times, 1907, 1909, charged with conspiracy against the crown, but always released for lack of proof." His grip tightened on his revolver. "You led raids against the royalists. You were the assassin sent after Ismael. You were the one who stormed Mahmoud Khan's manor."

Amir stiffened, his fingers twitching near his holster.

Kazem's voice dropped to a deadly whisper. "And you... you're the reason my brother is dead."

Amir's brow furrowed. "I might have done those things... but who was your brother?"

Kazem's jaw clenched, rage seething in his eyes. "Enough of this." His breath

came out in a sharp exhale. "I'm going to kill you with my own hands."

With a roar, Kazem lunged at Amir.

Kazem crashed into Amir, his fists slamming into Amir's ribs with brutal force. Amir gritted his teeth, absorbing the pain before driving an elbow into Kazem's back, followed by a sharp knee to his stomach. Kazem staggered but refused to relent, throwing a powerful right hook that grazed Amir's cheek.

Amir ducked under the next swing and drove his fist into Kazem's groin. Kazem let out a sharp gasp, stumbling back, his face contorted in pain. Amir seized the moment and lunged, tackling Kazem to the ground. They rolled in the dirt, limbs locked in a furious struggle.

Before Amir could pin him down, Kazem twisted free and climbed on top of him, straddling his chest. His fists came down like hammer strikes, one, two, three, each

blow rattling Amir's skull. Blood trickled from Amir's lip, his vision blurring.

His hand fumbled blindly, fingers closing around a jagged rock. With a desperate grunt, he swung it against Kazem's temple. The impact sent Kazem reeling, collapsing onto his side.

Gasping, barely conscious, Amir dragged himself up and straddled Kazem, returning the onslaught. His fist slammed into Kazem's face, once, twice, a third time. Each punch was slower, more desperate than the last.

He raised his fist for another strike, but before he could bring it down, Kazem shoved him off with a grunt. Amir tumbled backward, and in one swift motion, Kazem kicked him hard in the stomach. The force sent Amir sprawling, his back slamming against the ground.

Both men lay sprawled on the ground, their bodies battered, their breaths ragged. Blood seeped into the dust

beneath them. The silence between them stretched, heavy and bitter, until Kazem let out a ragged cry.

"My brother died because of the communists," he snarled, his voice shaking with grief and rage. "He was a good man. He was an officer just doing his job, and you bastards killed him!"

Amir turned his head toward him, his face bruised and swollen, his expression tired, cold, but beneath it, a flicker of something else. Empathy, perhaps.

"I didn't kill him," Amir said, his voice hoarse. "It wasn't me. But what about all the lives killed during the last communist crackdown, huh? Were those justified? We never attacked anyone. We never killed anyone. We were trying to be a recognized party, just like the moderates, just like the democrats. But instead, the Shah decided to slaughter us. And your brother... he was part of that. Because he worked for the Shah."

Kazem opened his mouth, ready to argue, but no words came. He clenched his fists, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths.

Amir pushed himself up slightly, wincing. "How many children did your brother and others like him turn into orphans?" he demanded. "How many wives did they turn into widows? Do you know? Answer me!"

Kazem's jaw tightened. "No," he admitted, his voice raw.

A long silence settled between them, the weight of their words pressing down like a shroud.

Amir exhaled and let his head fall back against the dirt. "We're more than even," he muttered. "We're just pawns in a game played by greater powers... in schemes far bigger than either of us."

Kazem lay still, staring up at the sky, his breathing uneven. Amir sat in front him,

his arms resting on his knees, blood dripping from his fingers. For a long moment, neither spoke.

Then, Kazem let out a shaky breath.
"Maybe... maybe you're right," he
admitted, his voice barely above a
whisper. "Maybe I was just after hollow
vengeance. And maybe that doesn't
make either of us innocent."

Amir scoffed softly, shaking his head.
"None of us are innocent," he muttered.
"We just pick a side and hope it's the right one."

Kazem turned his head slightly, wincing at the pain. "Tell me... do you regret it? All of it?"

Amir sighed, looking off into the distance. "I regret that it had to be this way. That it always ends like this. But regret doesn't change the past, does it?"

Kazem let out a bitter chuckle. "No... no, it doesn't." He hesitated, then swallowed

hard. "If I had met you before all this... maybe we wouldn't have been enemies."

Amir looked at him, then nodded. "Maybe."

Footsteps echoed from down the street. Amir tensed, but before he could react, Omid's voice rang out.

"Detective Kazem!" Omid ran toward them, his coat flaring behind him. His eyes scanned the scene, bodies littering the street, the blood-streaked dust, the two barely breathing men. "Oh my God," he muttered, rushing to Kazem's side.

"Omid..." Kazem coughed, gripping his ribs.

Omid quickly crouched, inspecting Kazem's injuries. "You need a doctor. Now."

Kazem grunted in pain but managed a weak smile. "I've had worse."

"We are going," Omid muttered, signaling to a few men behind him to bring a stretcher.

As Amir lay on the bloodstained ground, his body aching with exhaustion, he watched in silence as Omid helped Kazem onto the stretcher. Kazem's gaze lingered on Amir for a moment, something unreadable in his eyes, before Omid and the others carried him away, disappearing into the smoke.

Amir exhaled slowly, staring up at the sky. The weight of everything, the past, the bloodshed, the choices, pressed heavily on his chest. He sighed.

Time passed. The world remained still, save for the occasional distant echoes of the city, the muffled murmurs of people too afraid to come close. Then, the sound of hurried footsteps.

Amir turned his head weakly, and his breath caught.

Yasaman.

Her dark eyes locked onto his, and for a moment, both of them froze. Amir felt the briefest flicker of relief, she had come. She was here. Maybe she had survived the chaos better than he had.

"You're alive," she said, voice sharp with something deeper than rage, betrayal.

Her breath was ragged, her hands trembling, but steady enough to hold the pistol aimed directly at him. Those dark eyes burned with fury and something even deeper, something raw and broken.

"Yasaman...?" Amir tried to sit up, but pain flared through his ribs.

"You left me," she hissed. "You left us."

She took a step closer, her hands trembling. "Where were you?" she demanded. "Where the hell were you, Amir?"

Amir blinked.

"I waited for you, Amir. I waited, and while I waited, everything fell apart. Do you know what I had to do?"

Amir's stomach twisted. "What happened?"

She let out a sharp, humorless breath. "Kemal stole everything from the hideout. Every last coin. He vanished like a rat in the night, leaving us with nothing." Her grip on the pistol tightened. "Hasan and Ali? Gone. Dead or worse, I don't even know. And me?" She let out a bitter chuckle, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I had nothing, Amir. No money. No allies. Just empty promises and a city that chews up people like us and spits them out."

Amir's voice was hoarse. "Yasaman, "

"You think I survived because I was lucky?" she spat. "I survived because I had to. Because I sold the only thing I had left, myself." She trembled, but her voice was steady. "I let men use me, Amir.

Strangers. I gave them pleasure just so I could see another day, just so I wouldn't starve in the streets like a dog."

Amir's chest tightened, his hands curling into fists against the dirt. "I didn't know, "

"Of course, you didn't!" she snapped.
"Because you weren't there!"

Her grip on the pistol wavered for the first time, her arm shaking. "You did this to me," she whispered. "You abandoned me."

A sharp gust of wind howled through the street. For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then, Yasaman took a breath, a deep, broken breath, and that was when her finger, slick with sweat, slipped on the trigger.

A gunshot rang out.

Amir gasped. A sudden, searing pain exploded in his chest. He looked down. Blood. His blood.

Yasaman's eyes widened in horror. She hadn't meant to pull the trigger.

"No... no, no, no," she whispered, stepping back, shaking her head wildly. The pistol slipped from her fingers, clattering to the ground.

Amir collapsed onto his back, the sky above him spinning. His breath came in shallow, ragged gasps.

"Amir!"

Yasaman flinched at the sound. A woman's voice.

She was running toward them, her face pale with terror, calling Amir's name over and over again.

Yasaman's breath hitched. Tears spilled down her cheeks. She turned, hesitated for a moment, one last glance at Amir, at

what she had done, then she ran. Disappearing into the alleys, her sobs swallowed by the city.

Sophia fell to her knees beside Amir, pressing desperately against his wound.

"Stay with me," she pleaded, her voice cracking. "Please, Amir, stay with me."

But his chest rose. Fell.

Then, stillness.

Sophia cradled Amir's lifeless body in her arms, her fingers trembling as they brushed over his bloodied chest. Her sobs wracked her body, her tears mixing with the dust and crimson staining the ground beneath them.

"Amir," she whispered brokenly, pressing her forehead against his. "You promised... you promised you'd come back."

The city around her was silent, the echoes of gunfire long faded into the wind.

A soft, shuddering breath left her lips, and she pulled back, her tear-streaked face twisting in anguish.

"You were supposed to come back," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "You were supposed to be here..."

She clutched his hand against her stomach, then her chest.

A sharp sob tore from her throat as she clutched his hand tightly, as if she could still hold onto him, as if she could keep him with her just a little longer.

But Amir was gone.

The wind howled through the empty street, carrying with it the weight of unspoken words, of shattered futures.

And there, beneath the pale morning sky, lay Amir's motionless body and Sophia mourning him.